
ADDRESS TO THE GRADUATING CLASS
OF THE
COLLEGE DEPARTMENT
HOWARD UNIVERSITY,

BY
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TRUTH AND REASON ARE COMMON TO EVERY ONE, AND ARE NO MORE HIS WHO SPAKE THEM FIRST THAN HIS WHO SPEAKS THEM AFTER; 'TIS NO MORE ACCORDING TO PLATO THAN ACCORDING TO ME, SINCE HE AND I BOTH EQUALLY SEE AND UNDERSTAND THEM.—*Montaigne.*

IF THOU BE A GREAT PEOPLE, THEN GET THEE TO THE WOOD COUNTRY AND CUT DOWN FOR THYSELF, IN THE LAND OF THE PERIZITES AND THE GIANTS, IF MOUNT EPHRAIM BE TOO NARROW FOR THEE.

—*Joshua.*

Mr. President, Dean of the College Faculty, Ladies and Gentlemen, Members of the Graduating Class :

When Socrates was about to be sacrificed upon the altar of truth, his devoted disciples gathered around him and asked if he had any especial advice or final message to leave with them in view of his approaching doom. But the serene philosopher, endowed as he was with a double portion of Greek moderation and calmness of spirit, replied that he had nothing new to offer them beyond the principles which he had striven to inculcate during the whole period of their intercourse as disciples and master. And so tonight, adopting the words of the martyred sage, I must warn you at the outset that I have no fresh advice or new words of wisdom to offer different from the lessons which I have striven to impart during the years of our academic relationship.

You have now come to the end of your scholastic labors. To you, years of hopes, ambitions, aspirations, and strivings are epitomized in the proceedings of this hour. For years you have been yearning for the large excitement of the outside world. Tonight you cross the threshold of college confinement into this larger life. The instruction which you have received here, and upon which your diplomas set a seal, will be of value to you only in so far as you digest and assimilate it, and wisely adapt it to the tasks which lie before you. A machine is an instrument whose purpose is to transmit and modify the force imparted to it, in such manner as to accomplish desired mechanical work. The function of machinery is to modify the form or direction of impressed energy and to transmit it to the required points of application. The steam engine takes in fuel containing, in latent form, the stored up energy of past ages, and transforms it into power available for the uses and wants of man. You are animated machines—pieces of divine mechanism. You have taken in a good supply of knowledge which represents the stored up energy of all human experience. Your efficiency in life will depend upon your ability to transmit this energy to the place where it is needed, and to transform it into whatever mode of force may be nec-

essary for the accomplishment of the tasks which devolve upon you. Many take in information as the sponge absorbs water. They saturate themselves to their fullest capacity, and boast of their bloated bigness ; but, like the sponge, they can give back to the world only that which they received from it, unaltered in quantity or kind. They make unprofitable machines. Such knowledge cannot result in practical wisdom. Vegetable life thrives best upon the substance of the mineral kingdom, but before it can make use of these gross elements they must be assimilated to the character and function of its vegetal nature.

If you would learn a language so as to have it become a practical instrument of expression, you must make it a part of your anatomy. Teeth, tongue, lips, and palate ; chest, diaphragm, thorax ; vocal chords, nasal passage, and Eustachian tube ; muscles of the face and eye ; the gesticulatory action and movements of the body—all form a part of the linguistic machinery, and must give spontaneous and pliant yieldance to its operation. When a language has thus permeated the whole system and become affiliated with the anatomical structure and functions of the body, it is made your willing servant to express, not only the ordinary wants and necessities of life, but also the profoundest thoughts of the intellect, the highest flights of fancy, and the deepest emotions of the soul. And so your knowledge must become a part of your moral and mental anatomy, if you would make it an instrument of power to uplift the world. It must not only be chewed and swallowed, but digested, assimilated, and changed into flesh, blood, muscle, and bone ; and, by the mysterious process of vital action, transmuted into the finer phases of thought, sentiment, passion, and power.

Your studies have brought you in touch with the fundamental problems of human life. Man sustains three primary relations to the universe.

1. He is connected with the eternal mystery, out of which he emerged and into which he will finally be absorbed. As a lone mariner upon the dark bosom of the ocean views a feeble light which suddenly looms up and flickers for a moment upon the wavering line of vision and then fades again into the surrounding gloom ; so man, a broken light of the infinite, looms up and shines

for a moment only upon the field of finite existence, and is straightway absorbed in the eternal mystery from which he sprung. Who knows whence he cometh or whither he goeth? The awful problems of Being and Destiny will ever constitute the highest themes for human contemplation.

2. Man is related to his fellow-man. The dawn of history breaks upon a world at strife—a universal conflict of man at war with his brother. The face of the earth has been dyed in blood, and its surface whitened with human bones, in the endeavor to establish a harmonious adjustment between man and man. There can certainly be no interest more fundamental or of greater concern to the human family than the solution of the problem—how men may dwell together in peace and prosperity, under a stable social, civil, and political policy.

3. Man is connected with the material and visible universe about him. His egotism first suggested that the universe was anthropocentric, and that all the rest of creation was intended solely to support and delight him. The development of the natural and physical sciences has taught us that man is indissolubly connected with the material and organic world, though possessed of the power to make all the rest of creation administer to his wants and well-being.

It has been the mission of four great peoples to work out these several problems. The Hebrews and Greeks have solved man's relation to the eternal mystery—the one in its religious, the other in its philosophical aspect; each has come as near the perfect solution as, perhaps, it is possible for the human mind to reach. Rome has perfected society in its organic and civil relations, and has left the organic principle which must lie at the basis of all subsequent social development. It was reserved for modern Europe to develop the physical and natural sciences, and to point out their practical applications to human needs. It is hard to predict the details of the pedagogical program of the future, but we may rest assured that it must be based upon these fundamental relations, for they fathom the depths of human interests and must for all time constitute the universal *trivium*.

You have studied these problems and these great peoples in vain, unless the mass of exact and refined information and the insight into

human nature in its original phases of action have fructified in your own character. Character is the assemblage of qualities which stamp the individuality and give it dignity, purity, and power, and make it more efficient for service. Your studies have necessarily reacted upon the character. Judea has taught you the rational joy of piety, reverence, and devotion, and how to seek spiritual satisfaction through the Christian ritual. It is said that mankind first determined the points of the compass by the desire to build temples of worship in exact line with the path of the sun. We, too, must go back to the temple at Jerusalem for our spiritual orientation. From Greece you have learned the virtue of moderation, the value of self-culture, and the pleasure of the pursuit of truth. Rome has shown the necessity of discipline, system, order, and method ; while Europe has taught you practical efficiency in adapting means to ends through the control of the forces and powers of nature.

I do not mean to flatter you or to exaggerate your attainments. You have only grasped these subjects in outline. A full comprehension of them will require the study of a life-time. But knowledge derived at first hand and from original sources must have infiltrated into the pores of your nature, and trickled into the innermost crevices of your character. Herein lies the great advantage of the higher education, or rather the *deeper* education, that education which fathoms the depth of human experience. It is only by long study and reflection upon the fundamental principles of things that the nature is uplifted and improved. The mere rudiments of knowledge, practical information or manual cleverness, cannot refine the nature or purify the character. They do not reach the soul, but leave the human spirit in the same sad condition in which they find it. But a system of studies embracing the whole cycle of human experiences and interests cannot but leave the nature purer, the character nobler, and the faculties stronger and better able to perform any task which may be assigned them.

Keep abreast of the times. We live in an age of rapidly revolving changes. Process succeeds process in such rapid succession that we have scarcely time to test the advantage and value of the one before it is succeeded by another promising better and larger returns. The methods of the past, no matter what halo of endearment tradi-

tion may have woven about them, must give way for the more facile and fruitful method of the present day.

During the latter part of the thirteenth century there flourished a great Scotchman by the name of John Duns Scotus. He added to his keen Scotch insight into things, all the subtle learning of his day and generation. Espousing one side of the existing controversy, he threw all the energy of his nature on the side of scholasticism as opposed to the classical learning. He gained great celebrity and gathered about him enthusiastic disciples who were proud to be called "Duns men," after the name of their great founder. But after the brilliant Erasmus had changed the tide of opinion in favor of more rational and liberal methods of learning, the glory of the "Duns men" became their shame. Their name, assumed as a shibboleth of proud distinction, became a by-word of ridicule and reproach; and the only relic we have left us of this once famous school of learning is the survival of the word *Dunce*. Thus it is, the wisdom of one age may become the folly of the next, and the philosopher of today, the fool of tomorrow. We live in an age of machinery, an age in which man performs all of his undertakings through the mediate agency of tools; all great enterprises are conducted through organization, the most perfect of all machinery. Even our politics are conducted by machines. If you would keep abreast of the times you must use the best instrument available and apply the latest approved methods to whatever tasks you undertake. If you would enter into the rivalry of life with hope of success, you must select your chosen line of work; be on the alert for the latest discovery in science, invention in art, or advancement in thought, which bears upon your vocation. Use all the instrumentalities which human skill has perfected and human wisdom approved; and keep yourselves in soldierly readiness to obey the voice of progress when she gives the command *Forward! March!*

In his baccalaureate discourse the President urged you to preserve your self-respect. All the world respects a man who respects himself. This proposition has the force and sanction of a universal truth, for it is equally true when stated negatively—all the world despises a man who despises himself. You will find the maintenance of self-respect a most trying and difficult task. Men will revile you,

despitefully use you, and ignore your just claims to recognition because of ethnological peculiarities for which you are not responsible. It becomes easy to accept the valuation which others set upon you and to conclude that you are good for nothing but to be cast out and trodden under the feet of men. You must never forget, however, that a mind conscious to itself of the intellectual and moral rectitude of its nature can always contemplate its own action with self-satisfied complacency. There is no creature so contemptible as he who insults his own soul, or who does not seek first the approval of God and his own conscience. How poor is human recognition when you and God are aware of your inward integrity of soul. Keeping clean hands and a pure heart, you can stand up before all the world and say, "Doubtless thou, O Lord, art our father, though Abraham be ignorant of us and Israel acknowledge us not."

Do not go through the world with a self-deprecatory demeanor, as if you owed the rest of mankind an apology for existing. You are men created in the image of God, and any lack of appreciation of that fact is a reflection upon the original. Enter into the zest of existence. Consider "what a piece of work is man! How noble in reason, how infinite in faculty, in form and moving how express and admirable, in action how like an angel, in apprehension how like a god—the beauty of the world, the paragon of animals." All this refers to you. Do not think of yourselves as despicable and mean in comparison with the more forward class who are in the van of civilization. The creator is greater than the creature. Man is the architect of civilization, and is, therefore, greater than the handiwork which he has made. Destroy all society, government, and existing forms of culture, obliterate every vestige of civilization, but leave a single pair of human beings upon the earth, even though they be of the lowest existing type of mankind, and in course of time they will rebuild all of the destroyed standards, and that, too, only as a stage in a larger and still more glorious expansion. You are at the climax of creation and, conscious of the dignity of this distinction, let this be your song of triumph:

Immense have been the preparations for me;
 For room to me the stars kept aside in their own rings;
 My embryo has never been torpid, nothing could overlay it,
 For it the nebulae cohered to an orb,
 The long, slow strata piled to rest it on,
 Vast vegetables gave it sustenance,
 Monstrous sauroids transported it in their mouths and deposited it with
 care—
 All forces have steadily been employed to complete me;
 Now on this spot I stand with my robust soul.

This is the common heritage of humanity.

The diplomas which you hold in your hands confer upon you all the rewards, rights, privileges, honors, and distinctions which are accustomed to be conferred upon the choicest youth of the human race throughout the civilized world. This honor places you among "the heirs of all the ages, in the foremost ranks of time." Remember the sentiment so often emphasized upon your attention by your dean, "*Noblesse oblige.*"

But I must caution you to discriminate finely between self-respect and self-conceit.

They say that egotism and self-conceit are characteristic of the African race, and especially the Afro-American of academic training. You will have to deal with a population that places a premium upon bombastic display, and a discount upon unpretentious merit. You should devote your powers to the masses, to uplift them, and not to exploit them for your vainglory and unrighteous self-aggrandizement. It is said that a native African struts proudly when decorated with flaring European neckwear of the latest Parisian pattern, though he wear not a single other article of dress. Men cross the seas, and even go to college, without changing their natures. Witness those Afro-Americans who decorate themselves with the highest sounding literary and scholarly degrees, making heavy demands upon the alphabet to express them, without a single other item of intellectual adornment to support this gaudy display. Reprobate all such childish infirmity. It will only make you ridiculous in the eyes of sensible men. Be natural. Be simple. "Be whatever you may, but yourself first." Do not impose cheap and shoddy standards upon the masses, but teach them to appreciate the noblest and the best. Grasp the

real things of life rather than the superficial and showy. It is perfectly natural for a people who are rapidly acquiring civilization, and in whom the faculty of imitation is strong, to be captivated by the superficial aspect of things, to grasp after the frith and froth rather than the life-giving liquid upon which it floats. If a wild man from Borneo should plunge into the gayeties of the European capitals, should become initiated into the latest style of dress and forms of fashionable display, he might vainly flatter himself that he had leveled the immense lift between savagery and civilization, totally oblivious of the fact that he is separated from that life whose forms he slavishly imitates, by ten centuries of solid development. It is true that other men have labored and you have entered into their labors, but you must prove your right to this inheritance by striving to comprehend its inner spirit and meaning, and to unravel its secret and method. I have said that your education has brought you in touch with the fundamental things of life. Return ever and anon to these first principles as your standards and data of reference. In Greek mythology we learn that Antæus, the giant, in wrestling with Hercules received new vigor whenever he touched his mother earth; but Hercules, discovering the secret of his strength, lifted him into the air and squeezed him to death in his herculean grasp. I advise you to make sure of the firmness and fixture of your foothold in the basis of solid things; for fear that you be lifted into the delusive realm of unreal allurements and be intoxicated by the frivolous demigod of this unsubstantial region.

Do not waste time complaining against the existing order of society. Enter a manly protest against all forms of wrong and injustice, but do not pass your days in wailful lachrymations against the regulations of a civilization whose grandeur you have done nothing to make, and whose severities you are doing nothing to mollify. Leave that to the ignorant demagogue. Bring your knowledge of history and of human nature to bear upon the situation. I have already pointed out to you that the adjustment of man's relation to man constitutes one of the primary problems of life. Where this adjustment is complicated by diverse physical peculiarities and by different inherited or acquired characteristics, the problem becomes one of the greatest intricacy that has ever taxed human wisdom and patience

for solution. Race prejudice is as much a fact as the law of gravitation, and it would be as suicidal to ignore the operation of the one as that of the other. Mournful complaint is as impotent as an infant crying against the fury of the wild wind. History has taught you that the path of moral progress has never taken a straight line, but has ever been a zig-zag course amid the conflicting forces of right and wrong, truth and error, justice and injustice, cruelty and mercy. Do not be discouraged, then, that all the wrongs of the universe are not righted at your bidding. The great humanitarian movement which has been sweeping over the civilized world from the middle of the eighteenth century to the present time, manifesting itself in political revolutions, in social and moral reforms, and in works of love and mercy, affords the amplest assurance that all worthy elements of the population will ultimately be admitted to share in the privileges and blessings of civilization according to the measure of their merit.

Finally, I urge you to learn to deal with primary conditions. The visible forms of civilization are nothing more than the concrete embodiment of thought applied to things. Do not be parasites upon a generous society, eternally beseeching your neighbors to give you oil to replenish your lamps, but go rather unto them that sell and buy for yourselves. When the children of Joseph complained to Joshua that the limits of their territorial opportunity were too narrow, and that they wanted wider scope for the exercise of their powers, the grand old warrior of solstitial fame replied to them: "If thou be a great people, then get thee up to the wood country and cut down for thyself, in the land of the Perizites and the giants, if Mount Ephraim be too narrow for thee." And so I say to you.

Idle not your time in useless complaint against the narrowness of your opportunities and the misery of your lot, but rather "get thee to the wood country and cut down for thyself." Remember that a people who cannot deal with primary conditions, and who will not go to the wood country and cut down for themselves, can never contribute anything to civilization. Wherever there is soil to be cultivated, commodities to be exchanged, raw material to be refined, the hungry to be fed, the naked to be clothed, the ignorant to be enlightened, or the vicious to be restrained, there the educated man—

the man whose education has resulted in practical intelligence—will find the largest field for the exercise of his powers. Again, I urge you to bring your education to bear your practical tasks. You need not fear that your knowledge will carry you beyond the needs of the situation. The perfection of workmanship and the fineness of finish of an instrument should be conditioned upon its uses and function. It is the height of folly to put a razor-edge upon a broad-ax. But your duties will embrace the whole cycle of human activities, from meeting the crudest wants of a crude people to the highest problems of the soul. In dealing with a people who exhaust their strength in working with blunt iron without sufficient knowledge to whet the edge, your wisdom will ever be profitable to direct.

You are in the midst of the struggle for existence, not the mere struggle against the forces of nature and ferocity of man and beast for physical continuance, but you are struggling for the higher phases of existence which require finer qualities of fitness, and you will be put to the severest stress of mental and moral endeavor if you would

Break your birth's invidious bar
 And breast the blows of circumstance,
 And grasp the skirts of happy chance
 And grapple with your evil star.

